DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 159 734 CS 204 417

AUTHOR Gorrell, Donna
TITLE Eliminating the Negatives in Basic Writing.
PUB DATE 78
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (29th, Denver, Colorado, March 30-April 1, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Behavioral Objectives; College Freshmen; Composition (Literary); *Composition Skills (Literary); Course Descriptions; *English Instruction; Grammar; Higher Education; Mastery Learning; *Positive Reinforcement; *Remedial Instruction; Student Attitudes; *Student Motivation; *Writing Exercises
IDENTIFIERS Student Journals

ABSTRACT

A basic writing course designed for college freshmen who do not score high enough on entrance examinations to qualify for regular composition courses emphasizes the positive aspects of a student's writing. The nongraded course consists of four components: journal writing, grammar instruction, in-class paragraph writing, and controlled composition. The journals are used to establish rapport between students and the instructor; instead of grading the entries, the instructor writes comments about their content. Grammar instruction involves a mastery learner method. A test is administered after each unit; if a student achieves a certain level, the unit is considered completed and the next one is begun. Students who do not achieve mastery must review the material with the instructor and be retested. The weekly paragraphs are reviewed in tutorial conferences where the students read their works aloud and the instructor comments on them. If corrections are needed, the instructor asks for a rewrite. In the controlled composition component of the course the students copy a model composition or rewrite it according to instructions. This exercise provides students with practice in the forms that give them the most trouble and also teaches proofreading. Through these techniques the course eliminates the negatives of grading and failure and presents the possibility of error-free writing. (FL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED159734

Donna Gorrell
Department of English
Illinois State University
Normal, Illinois 61761

MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Donna Gorrell

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Eliminating the Negatives in Basic Writing

Accentuate the positive,
Eliminate the negative,
Latch on to the affirmative,
Don't mess with Mr. In-Between.

The words of this old song make a good theme for basic writing, where the emphasis must be on the positive if we are to achieve any success at all. Students come into these courses knowing without a doubt that they can't write. They know it because they've been told it repeatedly, the last time being when they were put into your course: "bone-head" English, remedial writing, or whatever other stigmatic appellation it's been given. These students talk familiarly about their errors: "I see now where I made my mistakes," "I'm always getting my letters turned around," "I can never keep those two words straight." It seems almost in vain that we talk to them not about mistakes, but about appropriateness for the level of usage, and that for the most part their writing is correct English usage. These are students who need a lot of accentuating of the positive; and this can be done only if we try, as much as possible, to eliminate the negatives in their writing experiences.

CS204 417

Our basic writing courses at Illinois State University are taught to college freshmen who do r t score high enough on entrance examinations to qualify them for the regular freshman composition course. They are advised (not required) to take basic writing, a credit/no-credit course that does not count towards graduation. My thinking when I first started teaching the course was that the non-grading was unfair to the students who were advised into the course, since they have to put many hours and quite a bit of effort into ending up with just a "credit" at the end of the eighteen weeks. I would rationalize it to my students by telling them that the course would prepare them for freshman composition where they would get a grade, and it would be a better one. I don't know what they thought of that; they probably saw through it.

However, my thinking has since changed. I see the non-grading as a benefit. I don't need to worry about trying to teach everything at once--as we do in most composition classes--in order to bring about better writing. And my students need only reach the C-level. They don't have to be concerned that they're not making A's, because there is no such thing in this class. You may be thinking that the motivation is not there either, and for some misplaced students it's not, but for students who need to take a course in basic writing, it takes motivation just to keep their work at the C-level. So freedom from letter grades has these advantages: I have all semester to teach what I think needs to be covered, and we have eliminated one of the negatives--low grades.

My course in basic writing consists of the following components:

1) Weekly in-class original paragraph writing, with a model,

2) Controlled composition, at least once a week,

3) Journal writing, three to four entries per week, and

4) Grammar instruction.

It's my intent to talk in depth about the first two, original and controlled writing, but I'd like to mention the second two just briefly.

The journal writing is not graded, but I do take up the journals once a week and read them, while the class is doing their in-class writing, and I make comments on them. My comments are not of the corrective type but more in the nature of chatty replies to the content of the page. I don't mark any errors unless a student asks me to. I find that the journals are a key factor in establishing rapport between me and the students. Frequently as they leave class on Friday the first thing they do is to open their journals to see what kind of reply I made to their entries.

Grammar instruction I do, not because studies show it improves composition, but because writers need to know what a sentence looks like, and how it goes together. They don't need to know the names of all the parts of speech--somebody has already tried unsuccessfully to teach them anyway--but writers do need to know that sentences are made up of subjects and verbs and prepositional phrases, and sometimes other clauses--plus a few other things. They need to know that some of our most common verbs have irregular parts, but they don't need to settle in their minds once and for all how to tell lie from lay. What they need to know is that they can find these irregular verb forms in the dictionary.

For grammar instruction I use the mastery learning method. After each small unit, say identification of subjects and verbs, I have a short test. If a student achieves 85 percent mastery--for example, no more than three wrong in 20--the unit is considered completed and the next one is begun. If a student does not achieve mastery, we go over the material again in conference, and when the student is ready I re-test. Since the units are small, mastery is generally achieved at this point if not earlier. There are no failures--another negative eliminated. Working within the context of a non-graded course makes the mastery method possible.

Integral to my method of grading compositions is the tutorial conference, which is a major component of the basic writing classes as taught under the High Potential Students Program at I.S.U. Built into our course is a half-hour weekly conference with all of our students. You're thinking that's either a staggering teaching load or else we don't have very many students. Well, actually both are true. During the regular semester we teach three classes of fifteen students each. The classes are some combination of freshman comp and basic writing, but all forty-five students are tutored by us, their teachers. During our first semester under this load, we found toward the end that we were getting sick, tired, and barely dragging ourselves into the office in the morning. There wasn't enough time for class preparation, various administrative duties that we all have, and reading all the papers we assigned. But I've since found that after the first week or two I don't need to see my students every week. Every two weeks is just as effective.

Next to that discovery, the biggest time-saving device I've come up with is not reading the papers--not until the students come in for conference, that is. Then we read them together. I use this method of grading for both basic writing and freshman comp essays. In basic writing, these papers are paragraphs, generally about a page in length, written on an assigned topic and after a model paragraph. The thought and content are original, but the paragraph structure is patterned: topic sentence, discussion, and concluding sentence.

When the student comes in for tutorial conference, I get out the paper, which I haven't yet read, and ask him or her to read it aloud. This gives the student a chance to take a fresh look at the work, making any changes desired, and it gives me the opportunity to think about content-structure, development, continuity, and the point it makes--without the distractions of misspelled words or comma splices. Then I share my judgments with the student. There is always something positive that can be said about the content. If there is a weakness, say in development or structure, I point it out and tell the student we'll see as we go through the paper together how the writing could have been strengthened.

Then we start back at the beginning, reading the paper together. I tell the student, "Now that we know what it says, let's see how it looks on paper." When we come to an error, I point it out, explain why the usage is not correct, and then try to involve the student in changing it, either suggesting the correct form or choosing between alternatives. Sometimes the usage is a question not of correctness but of appropriateness. Then I point out that since writing is at a slightly

more formal level than casual speech, another form would be better. The student usually knows what the form is, and suggests it. Frequently the error is brought about simply by the fact that it's on paper, and I remind the student that writing is different from speech: that in speech we don't have to spell, and we punctuate naturally, with our voice level. I ask him or her to listen for the drop in voice at the end of a sentence (a period!) and at the moderate drops within the sentences (commas).

The explanation is not foolproof and may not help punctuation very much, but at least the students begin to get the idea that there is some rationality behind the marks we sprinkle our sentences with and that most of the time they speak correct sentences. I remind students of how much they know about grammar, that they knew most of it before they started school, and that their trouble spots are relatively few and mainly connected with writing. I never attempt to change or correct their speech. I am their writing teacher, and if I can teach them to write well, they'll speak well too when they want to.

After the student and I have gone over the paper together, I usually ask for a rewrite with the suggested changes. I have the original returned with the revision, and I grade the revision, balancing its quality with that of the original. This delayed grading, I'm sure you will notice, gets around the sticky task of affixing a grade on the paper in the student's presence, which is the hardest part of grading papers in conference. Usually in the first half of the semester I don't even grade the paper, but by mid-semester the students are getting anxious to know how they're doing, so I begin grading.

The other kind of writing my basic classes do is controlled, or guided, composition. This type of writing was originally devised as a method of teaching English as a foreign language. Students are given a model composition, and they either copy it exactly or rewrite it according to certain instructions. Students progress in graduated steps from simple copying to sentence manipulations that approach sentence combining with subordination, coordination, and modification. They may change a composition written in present tense, for example, to something that happened a hundred years ago, or instead of the "I" pronoun they will use "Mr. Brown" or "he." I'm sure you can see the possibilities. For the first example, tense change, all verbs must be recognized and given the past ending. In the second example, third-person indicative forms come to the fore, not to mention intensive practice with pronouns. In this type of writing students do not need to think about what they are saying but only about how they are saying it.

The writing can be begun in class, or done entirely outside of class. I try to grade the papers the day they're brought in, which can be done very efficiently if the students are required to underline each change they have made. If the changes have been made correctly, the students go on to the next step. If not, they stay on the same step, either writing another composition or rewriting the same one. I ask for at least one composition per week, but many students catch on to the thing and do many more. It's a method of writing that can be error-free. It provides practice on the forms that give basic writing

students their most trouble, and it teaches careful proofreading--possibly the most essential skill of basic writing.

There is no grade involved in controlled writing as I use it. The compositions are either correct, and the student goes on to the next step, or they're not, and the student practices the same step again. But it permits students to see that they're making progress in gaining a command of written language. And because error-free writing is attainable, another negative is being lessened. (References: Christina Bratt Paulston and Mary Newton Bruder, Teaching English as a Second Language, Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop, 1976; and Linda Ann Kunz and Robert R. Viscount, Write Me a Ream, New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1973).

So this is the way I eliminate some of the negatives of basic writing. In the journals I chat with my students about subject matter. In grammar I allow them to achieve mastery instead of failure. In paragraph writing I do not present the students with an ink-splattered paper but instead compliment them on content and then, with them, look at errors. And finally I give them the possibility of error-free writing while they use the very forms that trouble them in free composition.

Most of all, I like my students, most of them, and in the rapport we achieve in my office they know it.

Donna Gorrell
Illinois State University
Normal, Illinois 61761